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Viewing cable 09ISTANBUL83, US-IRAN RELATIONS: WHY IRAN REFUSED THE US

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Understanding cables

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- The top box shows each cables unique reference number, when and by whom it originally was sent, and what its initial classification was.
- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
09ISTANBUL83	2009-03-03 06:54	2011-08-30 01:44	SECRET	Consulate Istanbul

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2011/04/17/112290/state-department-cables-reveal.html>

VZCZCXRO7492
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHDIR RUEHKUK
DE RUEHIT #0083/01 0620654
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
P 030654Z MAR 09
FM AMCONSUL ISTANBUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8801
INFO RUCNIRA/IRAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000083

SIPDIS

LONDON FOR GAYLE; BERLIN FOR PAETZOLD; BAKU FOR MCCRENSKY;
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DUBAI FOR IRPO

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/03/2019
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [KDEM](#) [IR](#)
SUBJECT: US-IRAN RELATIONS: WHY IRAN REFUSED THE US
BADMINTON TEAM

REF: IRPO DUBAI 95

Classified By: Deputy Principal Officer Sandra Oudkirk; Reason 1.5 (d)

[1](#)1. (S) Summary: A trusted contact claims he was told by a

close advisor to Iranian President Ahmadinejad that Iran denied visas for the planned February 4, 2009 visit of the US women's badminton because of the USG's "bad faith" in announcing the visit earlier than Iran had requested. According to the contact, Supreme Leader Khamenei only agreed to the visit after Ahmadinejad urged him to do so, and only on the understanding that no public announcements would be made until after the team's arrival in Iran. Instead, the USG announced the visit on February 2, as the team was awaiting Iranian visas in Dubai. The regime wanted to maintain full control of media coverage of the event, to avoid a replay of the 1998 US wrestling team visit, when Iranian crowds were filmed waving American flags and cheering the US team. The regime believed the USG issued the early announcement to create a similar dynamic, and now Khamenei and Ahmadinejad feel "burned." Comment: If accurate, this scenario underscores the challenges to building trust with a regime that feels an obsessive fear of losing control over both the process and substance of possible engagement with the USG. End Summary.

¶2. (S) "A first test": A trusted contact of ConGen Istanbul's Iran Watcher who recently returned from a visit to Tehran recounted a detailed explanation he said he received from a close advisor to President Ahmadinejad over why Iran refused to issue visas in early February to the US women's badminton team. In comments that track with IRPO Dubai's reftel reporting, our contact says he was told that Supreme Leader Khamenei was initially opposed to allowing the visit, but President Ahmadinejad urged him to accept it. Even though planning for this cultural exchange began before the Obama administration took office, the regime including Ahmadinejad believed this represented an important early gesture by the new administration to build confidence and show respect, and therefore a "first test" whether Iran could work effectively with the Obama administration.

¶3. (S) Maximum GOI control: According to the presidential advisor, the Iranian side insisted on a "carefully calibrated" sequence of timing as a key requirement for allowing the visit to proceed. Iran believes it had a clear understanding with the USG (working through the US and Iranian badminton federations, which in Iran's case took instructions directly from the President's office) that announcement of the badminton team's travel to Iran and participation in the Fajr Tournament would be embargoed until the tournament's opening ceremony on February 5. Iran demanded this condition because Iran's leaders still remember with discomfort the 1998 US wrestling team's visit to Iran, when -- because of what Iran now sees as a failure on its part to insist on airtight control over media coverage of the event -- Iranian and international press broadcast scenes of Iranian crowds cheering wildly as the US team entered the arena carrying an American flag and continued to cheer the US team during its matches, sometimes even waving American flags in support. Khamenei demanded that there be no possible repeat of such a scene within Iran. Given that the badminton tournament was a women's sporting event and women's sports are not televised in Iran, the regime felt confident it could maintain full control over the event itself, allowing press coverage only of the opening and closing ceremonies. To maximize its control, the regime insisted on an embargo over any announcement or media coverage of the US team's participation until the team's arrival, i.e., after the team had been issued visas in Dubai and flown to Tehran. This important detail was explicitly agreed between the sports federations, representing (in Iran's view) an understanding between the highest levels of the USG and GOI, the Ahmadinejad advisor insisted to our contact.

¶4. (S) "We were burned": Thus, when surprised regime leaders saw the February 2 State Department announcement of the badminton team's participation in the Fajr Tournament, according to our contact, they immediately assumed "bad faith" on the part of the USG, concluding that this was an deliberate effort by the administration to gain advantage over the GOI and undercut the regime's control of media coverage of the event. The regime's immediate response,

ordered by Khamenei, was to refuse to issue the visas. As the Ahmadinejad advisor explained to our contact: "Battles of this nature, when foreign visitors come to Iran to participate in sensitive or symbolic events, must be on our terms and under our full control. We had an understanding

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with the U.S. over how this would proceed, and we were burned." He added that Ahmadinejad, having personally persuaded a reluctant Khamenei to allow the visit, felt particularly aggrieved, and speculated to his close advisors afterwards that this was evidence of "anti-Iranian influence" among recently appointed foreign policy officials in the USG.

In typical Iranian fashion, GOI spokesmen blamed the cancellation on other factors, including (from the MFA) the "time consuming process" of visa issuance and (from Keyhan and other conservative mouthpieces) the USG's failure to condemn Israel over Gaza. But according to our contact, Tehran assumes Washington "fully understands the real reason" for the cancellation.

15. (S) Comment: Although it may seem far-fetched that such a non-political exchange visit would be cancelled over a seemingly mundane detail like the timing of the press announcement of the visit, in Iran's case this scenario is entirely plausible. If accurate, this scenario highlights the challenges to building confidence with a regime that feels an obsessive fear of losing control over either the substance or process of possible engagement with the USG. Indeed, this underscores that to Iran the process of negotiations may often be as critical to demonstrating "goodwill" and to ensuring eventual success as the substance of the negotiations. This scenario also illustrates the regime's rigid expectation that, with regard to early confidence-building measures from the USG (especially involving CBMs likely to generate press coverage), the GOI must feel fully in control over how such measures play out, and that at the first sign of any deviation from what it believes is an agreed process, its first instinct -- reflective of its acute fixation on self-preservation -- will be to shut the process down and blame the other side. End comment.

WIENER